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Ireland's Separate Spheres? Re-evaluating Female Physical Culture in the Digital Age

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Ireland's Separate Spheres? *Re-evaluating Female Physical Culture in the Digital Age*

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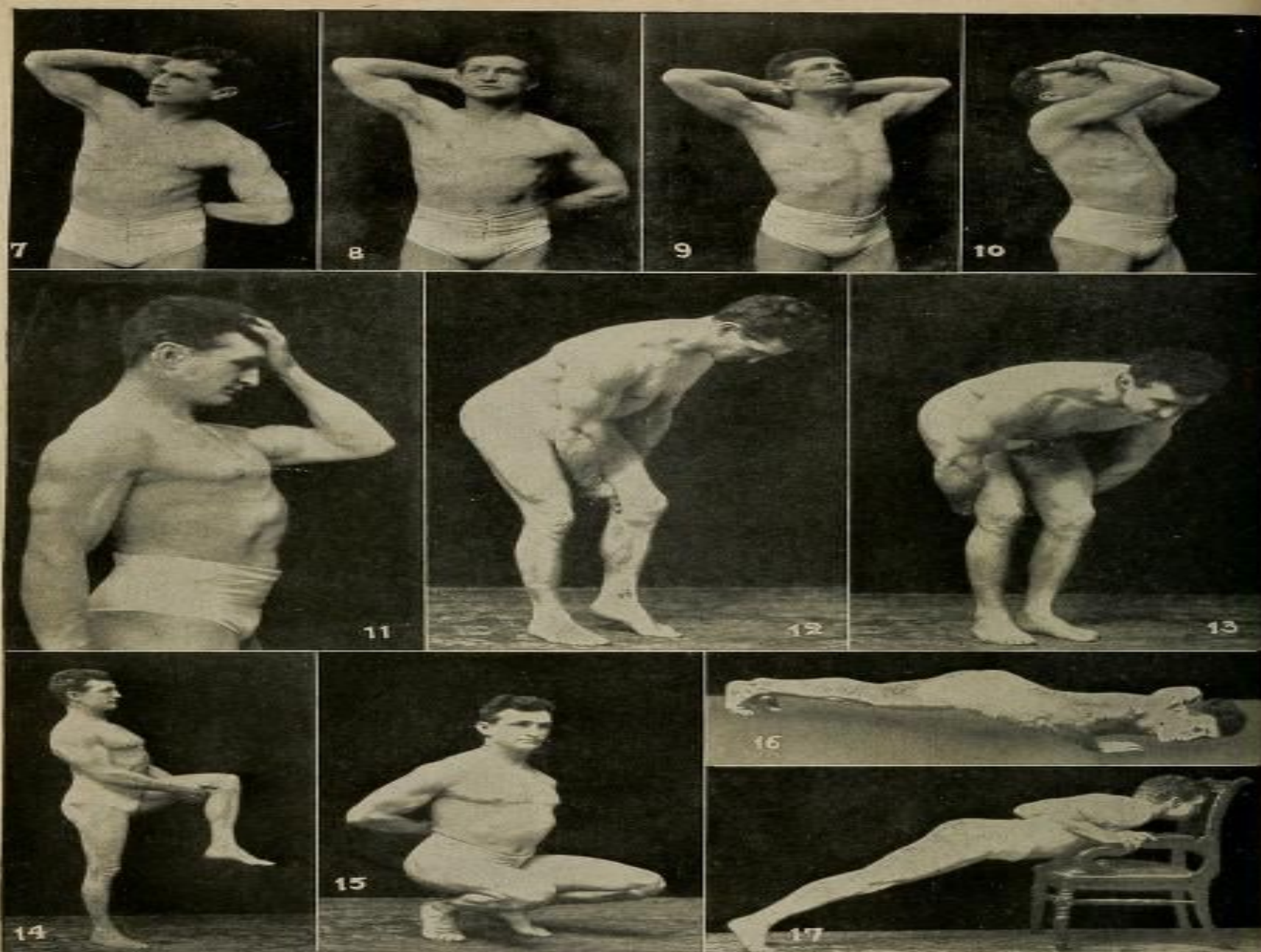
IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

What's in a name?

- “The development along natural lines of that wonderful combination of muscles that the Creator has given to men and women” (Sandow, 1902)
- “The sum total of a society’s activities and attitudes connected with physical development and education” (Roach, 2008)
- “A late nineteenth and early twentieth-century concern with the ideological and commercial cultivating of the body” (Budd, 1997)

Why is it Important?

- Societal Movement at a Time of Great Change
- Imbued the Body with Messages and Expectations
- Became a Means of Identity Formation
- Became a Means of 'Genderising' Subjects

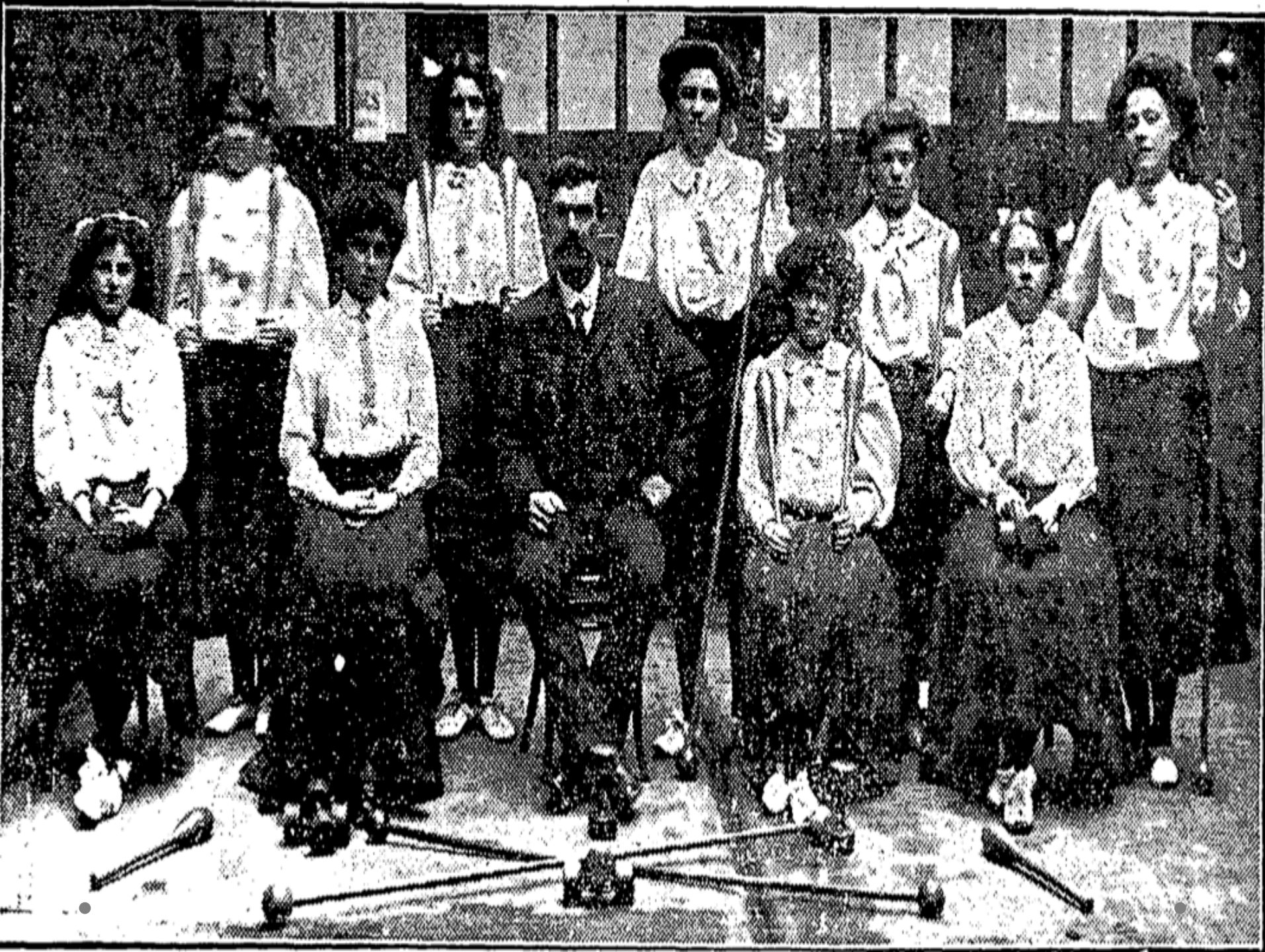


A chart or resume of Exercises 7 to 17, described in the chapters on The Spine and The Alimentary Canal.





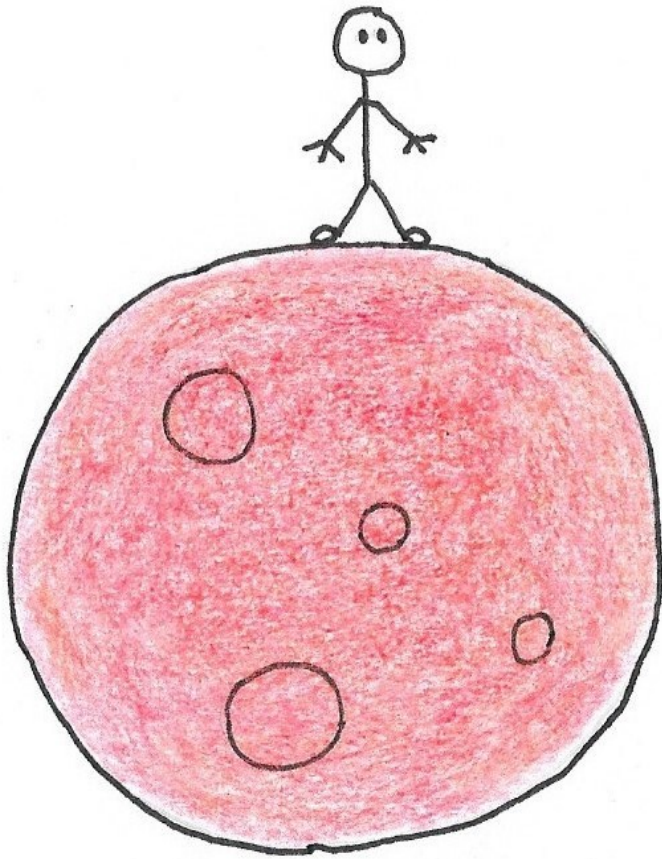
Mr. W. N. Kerr, of Dublin, Ireland, a vegetarian, non-smoker, and teetotaler. Takes most of his exercise with heavy dumb-bells. Takes a cold bath daily the year round. Is physical culture instructor at the International Wrestling and Weight-Lifting Club of Dublin, and is also actively interested in wrestling, swimming, boxing and other exercises.



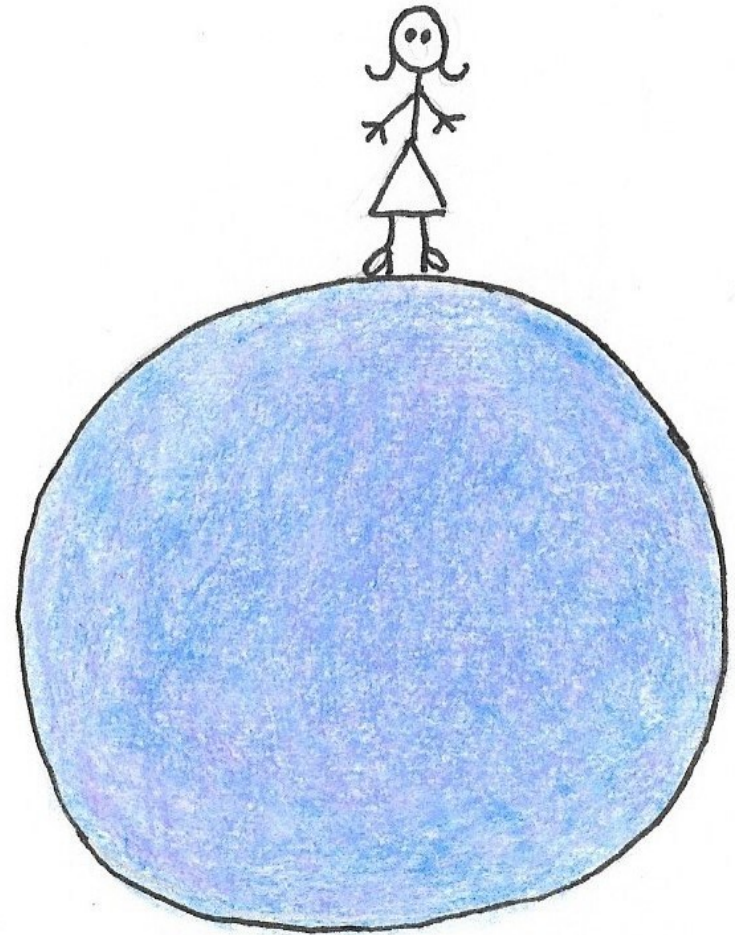


MISS MILLINGTON.

Gold Medal Winner in Ladies' Drilldown Competition.



Mars



Venus



From stereograph copyright by Underwood & Underwood, New York.

• Rude but well-meaning physical culture exercises of Irish school-children. •



Personal Diaries

'Our first drill conducted by Jack... I simply loved it. We went through the ordinary elementary evolutions of "squad" drill, and I found that my early gymnastic training made it all quite easy to me.'

'We had a most amusing drill, for Jack called some of us out in turn, and made us drill the class - I mean the section.'

'We practised hard in the afternoon, and went back to the O.T.H. directly after tea for our drill. I drilled the class for a bit till Jack came in, and shouted at them in tones as nearly resembling his as I could manage. It was rather fun.'

- Diary of Lady Lillian Spender (Late 1914).

Conclusion

- Much Work to be done on Female Physical Culture
- Gendered Discourses in Mainstream Discourses
- Digitization Opens New Perspectives

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IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
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1)

Hi Everyone,

My name is Conor Heffernan and it is truly a great pleasure to be here today speaking to you all about neverending nightmare and energy vacuum, that is my PhD research.

In the course of today's talk, we're going to do just three things. In the first instance we're going to run through some definitions of physical culture, reasons for its importance and maybe, just maybe, some audience participation so that all of us are clear on exactly what physical culture is, why Conor has effectively married himself to it, and just why people should care about it.

Following on from this, we're going to examine physical culture as it was conventionally presented during the period of my research, roughly 1890 to 1914. This will be done with reference to periodicals, state records and journals. In doing so, it will, I hope, become very clear that physical culture was, and indeed is, still intimately connected to societal ideas of gender and identity.

Societal ideas of gender and identity that are oftentimes very traditional with regards to the role of women.

That being the case, I have been lucky enough to be conducting my research during a time of great digitisation. This means that aside from saving me hundreds of euros in bus fares to the National Library, I've been able to take advantage of archives, journals and diaries in a manner simply impossible in a non-digital era. Such digitisation has allowed me to explore new possibilities and openings in Irishwomen's experiences of physical culture. Thus, dispelling or at least problematising, the neat gender segregation found in other sources.

2)

But to get there, we need to begin like all other stories, at the beginning. We need to begin like all boring stories...with a definition

What is physical culture? Or at least how can we get a rough understanding of its meaning?

Somewhat frustratingly, this relatively simple question has proven remarkably difficult to answer. Even for those living through the 'golden period' of Physical Culture such as Eugen Sandow quoted above. For some it was mere weightlifting and nothing more while for others it encapsulated everything from dancing, walking, football, swimming, drill to gymnastics and much more.

The simplest way of understanding this mercurial term is to define it as those exercises in which the development of the body is the key purpose, as opposed to sporting or financial gain. A handy way of shortening it? 'Keep Fit' as opposed to sport.

3)

In the first instance, physical culture in Ireland is worthy of historical attention simply because it was so popular during this time. From 1890 to 1939, thousands of Irish men, women and children engaged in physical culture systems, organisations and competitions. Some, as I draw out in my research, did so for explicitly political reasons. Many for personal.

What linked these disparate aims was the physical body. Training the body for sport, war or even the bedroom meant that individual's sought to to replicate and recreate societal messages through their own bodies. Physical culture is important because it became a means of embodying, both consciously and subconsciously, the wider the societal messages of the time.

In a sense, physical culture systems can thus be understand as a technology of the self to quote Foucault. A means by which individuals sought to create an individual self-hood. An individual self-hood that oftentimes sought to use physical culture to be seen as a strong, independent hard worker.

Of course one of the easiest identities taken up during this period, and indeed still taken up, is that of gender. Of masculinity and femininity. In this regard physical culture was promoted as a means of enhancing or steadfastening one's own gender credentials. Men could use it to become 'proper men', women 'proper women'. The latter being the focus of today's presentation.

But before we get to male and female physical culture, I think we need to take a short break...

4)

So I'm conscious that it's been a long day and in the hope of revitalising our interest for just a little longer, I'd like to take a short interlude from our talk.

For me, the greatest asset in studying physical culture is that one can very literally get a feel for one's subject matter and in the interest of method history I'd like to run through some exercises of the era. These moves come from the system of Bernarr MacFadden, an eccentric American physical culturist publishing in Ireland at this time. MacFadden once declared that weakness is a crime, and I'd hate to think of any criminals walking around such hallowed grounds.

In the first instance, I want everyone to place their hands like this with one hand pushing against the other. You should feel a slight pull on the bicep. Good now bring your hands together and push. Again you should feel a pull in the chest and shoulders.

Now far from superfluous, I've taken this time to introduce you to some of the methods Irish men and women were using to build their bodies at this time. Far from centred on MacFadden's system, Irishmen and women were exposed to several disparate systems..

5)

You see Irishmen, such as the one's photographed here in 1909, were already practising and performing a series of exercise and physical culture methods by the time MacFadden infiltrated Ireland. Indeed, from the period 1890 to 1914, one finds a vertiable proliferation of physical culture gymnasiums, clubs and competitions in Ireland at this point. Far from centring on MacFadden's physical culture system of dumbbells, pulleys and the bodyweight exercises we've just done, such organisations extend out in to drill, indian club swinging, weightlifting, jogging and of course gymnastics.

Quite interesting in this regard is the fact that such exercise was often promoted across the life-cycle, something which contrasts it quite nicely with the broader sporting movement of the age. For footballers or rugby players for example, it was expected that past a certain age, say one's mid-thirties, that active engagement in the pursuit would come to a stop. Not so with physical culture as one finds a litany of advice and newspaper columns in Ireland telling both the small child and the man child to take up physical culture exercises.

Indeed, one finds many an Irishman who excelled in physical culture practices following his 'retirement' from traditional sporting pursuits.

As a leisure activity therefore, physical culture could at times be more convenient for men (after all it could be done by one's self) and more enduring as it could be done across the life cycle.

6)

But attached to all this, were the gender identities being applied to these masculine endeavours. Writing in the mid-1990s, Dyer suggested that the white, male, muscular body became a symbol of great political importance during the fin de siècle period and beyond. Far from a meaningless musclehead, such men were linked to the Nietzschean Übermensch. A new, strict form of masculinity forged through the body.

One example of this is W.N. Kerr, pictured behind me who appeared in several physical culture magazines in the early 1900s. Posing in a variety of positions, Kerr always made sure his tee-totaling, vegetarian, non-smoking ways were publicised.

For those shyer than Kerr, masculine messages were nevertheless applied. Within public and personal discourse, physical culture was seen to produce strong and ready boys and men. Vigorous, often god-fearing individuals, who were true emblems of masculinity. In this way, the public spectacle of the muscled male body gained a heightened importance.

7)

Contrasting this, were the messages being applied to the opposite sex. You see, for women, physical culture was no less important, albeit with some significant differences.

In the first instance where women were encouraged to engage in weight lifting activities, coaches went to great lengths to limit the weights available to them. The idea being that 1 pound Indian clubs would provide beautiful and fit maidians whereas 5 pound Indian clubs would produce muscle bound monsters. Such thinking harked back to the Victorian age, a time which Patricia Vertinsky famously targetted as a time when women were seen as eternally wounded and frail.

In the second case, advice or rallying calls for women to engage in exercise were radically different from those facing men, thereby highlighting quite strongly the societal expectations of both groups. Whereas men were told physical culture would increase their sex appeal, attractiveness and assertiveness, women were encouraged to exercise to become better mothers, daughters and to avoid brain fatigue from excessive study.

Finally, and quite frustratingly from my point of view, photographs of female physical culture pursuits were almost unanimously monotone in Ireland up to the 1930s. What I mean by this is that such photos are almost always of the physical culture or gymnastic team posing as a team. A trope that can be contrasted with the variety of physical culture photographs of men and boys which almost always show the men engaged in active exercise. In these photographs, the dumbbellls, barbells and Indian clubs being used by the women are nothing more than mere oranments. We know the women were using these implements but as far as this photo is concerned, they're decorations.

In a sense, women's physical culture could be engaged in as long as it went under the rader. And this is the raison d'etre of today's presentation.

8)

Even for individual females, lauded for their athletic prowess, such as Miss Millington, the tactics were still the same. Female athletes simply did not appear in Irish periodicals engaged in physical activity. They did not appear in loinclothes such as W.N. Kerr, nor did they appear of their own accord.

Female physical culture writers or reporters were few and far between during the first decade of the twentieth-century. Occasionally a female lifestyle writer such as the Irish Time's Molly Bawn or Helen Hawthorne from Ireland's Own commented on female physical culture. But only in a very superficial manner and never with discussion to individual athletes. Something I find very problematic.

Bastardising that oh so influential work, one can see an artificial separate sphere with regards to male and female physical culture from 1890 to 1914.

In the first instance, male physical culture was regularly promoted amongst politicians, reporters and individual coaches. It was celebrated in the public sphere. Imbued with rigorous ideas about hegemonic masculinity.

Female physical culture, although in existence, went in an opposite direction. Training for women was done with reference to woman's inherent frailness. Discourses on the importance of physical culture for women focused not on the importance of strength or muscularity but rather the necessity for graceful and supple ladies or girls. Writings on female physical culture were done predominately by men and photographs of female physical culture in the Irish press were bland, and 'vanilla'. Never to my mind, showing females engaged in actual physical culture.

Thankfully the digitisation of archives around Ireland and the wider world has offered a new angle to this particular story.

In the first instance, the digitisation of several physical culture magazines from the United States and mainland Europe has provided me with some unexpected but welcomed insights.

This photograph, taken from Bernarr MacFadden's Physical Culture journal shows boys and girls in the West of Ireland engaged in physical culture in 1909. Readers of the magazine were told that:

'Irish school-boys, and for that matter school-girls, have taken kindly to the new order of things, so it is said. It is true that in a good many cases, the physical culture so taught is of a somewhat elementary kind and that the apparatus used is more or less primitive. But the idea and the enthusiasm are there nevertheless, and the modest prizes which are given for physical proficiency are the sources of keen competition among the youngsters.'

This photograph is one of the few instances we have of boys and girls engaged in physical culture pursuits together. We're told that the children in the foreground were likewise engaged in the physical culture activities shown in the background. A blurring of the separate spheres, and a welcome example of female physical culture in action.

Within the Irish context, the very recent digitisation undertaken by the Dublin City Libraries has been a godsend. Pictured above is a female physical culture class undertaken at Jacob's factory in 1913.

Despite producing enough biscuits to feed a small army, Jacobs also boasted a physical culture class and gymnasium for workers during this period. Here we see a class of female workers engaged in exercises using spectres and batons. Unlike the very manufactured photographs shown in the Irish press, this photograph comes from a private collection of the class in action.

We finally get a sense of how women exercised. We see that they engaged in similar exercises to men, albeit with lighter apparatus. We finally get to see the female athletic body in action.

Finally there is something to be said for the digitisation of personal diaries from women during this period.

Though not representative of your average woman on the street, PRONI's recent work on Lady Spencer's diaries make for some interesting reading. In them we learn of the woman's great love of gymnastics and drill. How physical and military drill was an eagerly awaited occasion each week and how she conducted herself during these classes.

As time went on, Spencer would lead the all women drill classes herself, much to the chagrin she believed, of some of her fellow classmates.

Why this is important to me is that I have neither the time nor the imagination to trawl through random diaries in the hope of finding scant references to physical culture. The digitisation of journals and autobiographies has given me a huge amount of freedom to explore areas previously shut off. And in the case of Lady Spencer we get a sense of why it's important.

While obviously not encapsulating the totality of her existence, exercise and drill nevertheless played a large part in Spencer's life. She used it as a means of diversion but also I suggest, a means of transformation. From merely participating in exercises to leading them. A role typically reserved for male instructors.

Thus, it is unlikely that my research could, will and hopefully shall, tell an accurate depiction of the past without the continued digitisation of Irish archives and indeed, those archives around the globe.

Female physical culture, was, as we now know, a highly fluid and in my view, engaging subject in early twentieth century Ireland. Yet should one rely solely on discourses found within Irish newspapers and periodicals, a gendered world emerges. A gendered world in which female exercisers were not active but rather passive agents in the world of muscle building. A gendered world in which females actually engaged in vigorous activity is strictly taboo and a gendered world in which female exercise largely goes under the radar. Especially when compared to the celebratory world of masculine activity.

Thankfully the opening up of various archives in both Ireland and further afield has provided new, diverse and downright interesting counterpoints. Over the last few minutes we've examined how journals, private photograph collections and personal diaries help to shed light on the lived experience of female exercisers away from the discourses created by male writers. A technological turn, which I believe, and hopefully you now do too, helps casts aspersions on the separate spheres of exercise projected in early twentieth century Ireland.

14)

On that note, I'd like to thank you for your time and your attention. It's been an absolute pleasure speaking to you today, listening to other's talking and hopefully chatting to more of you later on. I look forward to any comments, questions, suggestions and hopefully not too many criticisms that you might have,

If you want to know more please feel free to email me, tweet me or cyberstalk me, whatever works.

Thank you.